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ABSTRACT

The status of Mexican Americans in higher education is addressed, along with the role played by testing and assessment, and educational prospects for Mexican American children. The importance of community colleges in the education of Mexican Americans is noted. Reasons for declining college enrollments for Hispanics are identified: high college costs, the change in financial aid from grants to loans, more difficult admission standards, and the increased use of assessment. Three misuses of educational testing that have implications for Mexican Americans include: heavy reliance on testing for admissions, testing to predict college success, and teacher testing. It is suggested that the net result of the increased use (and misuse) of testing is a sharp decline in the enrollment of Hispanics in colleges and a reduction of Hispanics seeking to become teachers. The educational prospects of Mexican American children are not encouraging. Hispanics are poorer than the general population and their educational level is considerably below non-Hispanic Whites. Recommendations for the future include: providing access for Mexican Americans to social and economic mobility, increasing the number of Mexican American and minority teachers, improving preparation for college, and scrunitizing testing. (SW)

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The 1986 Tomas Rivera Lecture

FACING THE FACTS ABOUT MEXICAN AMERICA

by

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FACING THE FACTS ABOUT MEXICAN AMERICA*

when we walked
all over Minnesota
looking for work
No one seemed to care
we did not expect them to care

These five lines are from one of Tomas Rivera's poems, "The Searchers." As I present my sense of reality in Mexican America, please keep them in mind.

when we walked
all over Minnesota
looking for work
No one seemed to care
we did not expect them to care

I feel uneasy — and somewhat uncomfortable — being in a city where policy is set that mortgages the future of countless generations for destruction instead of construction, development and nurturing.

I feel uneasy — and somewhat uncomfortable — being in a city where the highest education officer of the land, to quote Matthew Prophet, superintendent of schools in Portland, Oregon, sacrifices "public education on the altar of political expediency."

I feel uneasy — and somewhat uncomfortable — being in a city where the only number that is increasing faster every year than the national debt and the defense budget is the percent of children who live in poverty in this country.

It is a delight and an great honor for me to be invited to present this, the second Tomas Rivera Lecture, co-sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education and the AAHE Hispanic Caucus.

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* Mexican America is the term coined by the Tomas Rivera Center to refer to the southwestern part of the United States - the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas.

It is fitting that at this national conference on higher education we should be addressing a regional reality, because what takes place in Mexican America has significant implications not only regionally, but also nationally and internationally. It is clear to me that most things in life are interrelated and interdependent. Countries are interrelated and dependent on each other; the same is true of generations of people. And it is also true of the institution that we call education. All its component parts are interrelated and interdependent.

Interdependency

Unlike those who Tomas Rivera saw as uncaring, we must all care because more and more we depend on one another. Countries are interdependent. The Spring 1985 issue of The Borderlands Journal describes the United States-Mexican border as "a unique ambience of human interdependence—culturally, socially, and economically." That special issue addresses the ways customs, values, mores, and ethics of each country are influenced by the other.[1] Border towns still remember "Black Thursday," the day in 1982, when the Mexican peso plunged and retail stores on both sides of the border went out of business and unemployment soared.[2] This interdependence affects both Mexicans and Americans; in the Texas border communities of McAllen, Brownsville, Laredo, and El Paso, 30 percent of the Hispanic families are below the poverty level.[3] The plunge of the peso had—and continues to have—international repercussions. Thus, the interdependency of countries is direct and immediate.

The interdependence among generations does not seem as direct and immediate, but it is there. Generally speaking, the young in most societies are nurtured, cared for, and educated by the adults. In our society, we also

make provision for the older, retired adults through such institutions and programs as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. The quality and quantity of the services provided by the society to both the younger and the older generations depends on the resources that the working adults contribute in the form of taxes that sustain these institutions and programs.

All parts of the educational system are also interrelated. We in higher education are part of a single system through which people move.[4] We cannot look at higher education without acknowledging the role of the elementary and secondary level.[5] Because we are so interdependent, we must care. How Hispanic youngsters do in school is important to the future of higher education but also to the future retirees—to the future of American society.

I will paint for you a mosaic of interrelated views of reality in Mexican America. I plan to cover 1) how Chicanos are doing in higher education, 2) the role played by testing and assessment for Mexican American students, and 3) and perhaps most important, what is happening to our children. With these three, I will be ready to suggest strokes which can change the picture 20-25 years from now.

Mexican America and Higher Education

While I am assuredly interested in all aspects of higher education, I am going to concentrate on community colleges, for these institutions have both benefits and liabilities to offer Mexican America. It is not new for Chicanos and other scholars to question the role of community colleges in educating Mexican Americans, as well as other minorities.[6] Community colleges are said to perpetuate the present social and economic inequities because of tracking systems which keep minorities segregated, because of vocational curricula

which prepares minorities for low skill jobs, because of high minority drop out rates, and because of the few minority students who transfer to universities and earn baccalaureate degrees.[7]

However, it is probably not fruitful to criticize community colleges because they have not been able to right all the wrongs associated with social inequality and economic discrimination.[8] For one thing, community colleges are unique and the students they serve are special. Their student population includes those with less academic preparation than most university students. Most of the students are part-time, commute to school, and can afford only the less expensive community colleges. Most are females. Most work and of those who work most do so on a full-time basis. Perhaps the best way to describe community college students is to use the term "swirling". They swirl from the community college to the university, to work, back to the community college, back to work, and on and on.[9]

Despite the weaknesses, community colleges are important to Mexican Americans. Community colleges provide their major initial—and for a lot, the only—access to higher education. On a national level, about 60 percent of all Hispanics enrolled in higher education are in two-year institutions.[10] In California, 85 percent are enrolled in two-year colleges.[11] Because Hispanics, as a group, are without funds needed to attend four year institutions, the community college will continue to be the primary access for Hispanics to higher education.[12]

There is still much work to be done. Mexican American students need better instruction. While all minority groups improved SAT scores in 1985, Mexican Americans had both Verbal and Math average scores 50 points below the average of all students.[13]

Mexican American students need to be encouraged to stay in school. While Hispanic high school graduates increased 38 percent from 1975 to 1982, Hispanic enrollment in college decreased 16 percent.[14] There are several reasons for this decline. First, educational costs, even at a community college, are now higher. Second, the change in financial aid from grants to loans has led to a perception, if not a reality, that financial aid is not available. Third, a lot of young people are attracted to the armed forces. Fourth, admissions standards to institutions have increased. The final reason for a decline among Hispanics enrolled in college is the increased use of assessment.

This leads me directly to my next point—the place of testing and assessment in the education of Mexican Americans.

Testing/Assessment and Mexican America

Chicano leaders have criticized standardized tests because they represent a White middle class bias of both culture and language which puts Mexican American students at a disadvantage. In addition to the tests themselves, we must address the problem of misuse of tests. I am concerned about the impact on Mexican America of three different misuses of tests in education: 1) heavy reliance on testing for admissions, 2) testing to predict college success, and 3) teacher testing.

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund recently petitioned the presidents of the three major testing organizations that are responsible for the development and administration of standardized tests. While these organizations criticize the excessive reliance being placed on standardized tests by colleges and universities, major problems continue.

There has been a rise in the use of cut-off scores for admission purposes, even though the College Board, Educational Testing Service, and American College Testing explicitly caution against such practices in their guidelines. The SAT is being used in a fashion for which it was never intended, to predict first year performance in college. Tests are increasingly being used to solve all education's problems. Teacher testing, for example, ignores the inability to test whether a teacher has the human skills necessary for teaching.[15]

The misuse of tests that most disturbs me is teacher testing. There are three levels at which teacher testing presently occurs: entry level (testing which allows access to colleges of education), certification level (testing which certifies entry into the teaching profession), and inservice level (testing for those already in service to determine their continued suitability as teachers).

It is important to know that in 1985 in California, only 39 percent of Hispanic test-takers of those planning to go into teaching passed the state-required California Basic Education Skills Test, whereas 76 percent of Whites passed.[16] Some will argue that the percentage of Hispanics who pass the test is increasing. It is also true that the number of Hispanics who take the test is decreasing. That fewer Hispanics are attempting to enter the teaching profession is significant.

The most flagrant misuse of teacher testing is at the inservice level. In 1983, Greg Anrig, President of ETS, voiced his concern to the Chief State School Officers on the use of inservice testing. He said:

> "Once employed, direct classroom supervision and evaluation of the teachers are possible and you can then assess those essential qualities of teaching competence, in addition to academic knowledge, that cannot be measured effectively by any paper-and-pencil evaluation—qualities such as dedication, sensitivity, perseverance, caring."[17]

Anrig went on to say, "The practice of requiring teachers to pass tests as a sole and determining condition of employment after they are on the job can be found in no other profession."[18]

Two years later, in 1985, Anrig reported that Texas was one of the states that had passed legislation which stipulated "all practicing teachers—regardless of years of service and satisfactory ratings by their school supervisors—would have to pass a one-time 'functional academic skills' or 'literacy' test in order to retain their teaching certification."[19]

To me, the sole use of a test to make decisions about teachers who are working does not make sense. Education Testing Service has concluded that unless there is a major change in teacher preparation, minorities in the teaching force will be cut from the present 12 percent to about 6 percent.[20]

In addition to this projected 50 percent reduction of the present number of Hispanic teachers now in service, the net result of the increased use (and misuse) of testing is a sharp decline in the enrollment of Hispanics in institutions of higher education and a reduction of Hispanics seeking to become teachers.

Tomas Arciniega finds it very ironic that the standardized test, originally "conceived as a mechanism to increase access for talented youngsters of modest and poor economic circumstances . . . conceived specifically with the intent of making universities less elitist . . . these days is often viewed as serving the exact opposite function—as reducing the accessibility . . . to Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities most of whom come from modest and poor economic backgrounds."[21]

But to me testing is not THE problem. Testing, in my view, is a symptom, a finger pointing to the problem. Sometimes I think that we in education—when someone points a finger at a problem—spend a lot of time and

energy criticizing and investigating the finger instead of dealing with the problem, in this instance the quality, or lack of it, in the education that our children are receiving. Standardized tests help us document how badly the educational system works for our children.

I am not saying that there is no problem with tests and their use and misuse. What I am saying is that tests are the finger, not the problem. And what we do now will make a significant difference in the future. For, as our children depend on us now, so will we depend on them 20-30 years hence.

Educational Prospects for Mexican American Children

Let us examine another aspect of the mosaic—the interdependence of generations in the makeup of the population in Mexican America. Generally speaking, the Hispanic community is between 10-12 years younger than the majority. In 1984, 44 percent of Hispanics were 19 years of age or younger, compared to 28 percent for Whites; 12 percent of the Hispanics were less than five years old, compared to 6 percent for Whites.[22]

The average age of the White community is now about 32 or 34 years. The so-called baby boomers—now at the apex of their productivity at average ages of 35-45 years—will be thinking of retirement in some 25-30 years, around 2010.

By the year 2010, a significant percentage of the majority White community, by then retired, will be to a large degree dependent on the institutions and programs that will then be supported by the present Hispanic children.

These children are now dependent on the majority White community—the baby boomers in a lot of instances—for the education they need to be able to work

so they can pay the taxes to support the institutions and programs which help sustain the Whites.

Consider again how generations are interdependent. "The Dependency Ratio" is a term used to define the number of workers needed to support one retired Social Security beneficiary. In 1900, 100 workers supported less than 10 retired persons. By 1975, the ratio was 10 to 3. Several 1979 estimates suggested that by 2025, the ratio would be 2 to 1.[23] In 1981, the projected 2 to 1 ratio was moved back 20 years to 2005.[24]

By then, the retired group will become more White, while the work force becomes more varied.[25] By 2000, 1 in 3 workers will be non-white.[26] By 2000, there will be 27 million Hispanics in the United States,[27] and with the high birth rate among new immigrants, the projection could be higher.[28] So, in 2010, we can expect that in Mexican America one of the two workers supporting each retired person, most of whom will be White, will be Hispanic.

However, the educational prospects of Mexican American children are not encouraging. Hispanics are poorer than the general population. Listen to these figures, if you will. For the last 10 years, the median family income of Hispanics has consistently been substantially below the rest of the population.[29] Some estimate that today up to 50 percent of Mexican Americans live below the poverty level.[30]

Hispanic children are about 2 1/2 times as likely as non-Hispanic White children to be poor. In 1984, about 40 percent of all Hispanic children lived in homes where the income was below the poverty level, compared to about 13 percent of non-Hispanic White children.[31] Consider that an estimated 14 million children in this country live below the poverty level and that 40 percent of the poverty population is less than 17 years old.[32] While Hispanics, who compose 20 percent of the population of Texas, have the lowest

median income of any state, non-Hispanic White Texans enjoy one of the highest median income levels.[33]

The educational level of Mexican Americans is considerably below non-Hispanic Whites. Among the parents of today's teenagers there is a tremendous gap in higher education experience. In Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, 20-26 percent on non-Hispanic White parents have completed four or more years of college compared to 5-7 percent for Hispanic parents.[34] Among 18-24 year old Hispanics, 32-49 percent have not completed high school.[35] Yet, despite the low frequency of higher education among Mexican Americans, the education of these children is critical.

The Future of All America

The reality of Mexican America raises a basic question about the future of our country. Are we headed for a bimodal society with one group educated, White, affluent, older, and retired and the other group uneducated, minority, poor, and young? Both groups have the potential of taking more from the society than they will contribute. Perhaps, this is already beginning to happen and I don't think we can afford it.

I agree with Jerome Bruner who in 1983 wrote:

> In some way, our life as a nation depends both on cultivating intelligence to keep our complex social order running, and preventing the formation of a permanently alienated, undereducated, unemployed "under class."[36]

I submit to you that the political, economic, cultural, and social fabric of the United States can not sustain such a future. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, when I am tired and disappointed, I wonder—deep inside—if we might become another South Africa. I think that we must decide if we want our country and our people to face a similar reality.

The business community is beginning to realize that education is part of the solution. A study funded by the California Roundtable, an organization of 90 leading corporations that study current issues on broad policy as they impact California, was recently published by Rand. They reported some fascinating data on Mexican immigration to California that lead to these findings. One, presently Mexican immigrants in California are an economic asset to the state in that their contribution to public revenue exceeds their cost of services. Two, Mexican immigrants are following historical patterns of integration into U. S. society in which successive generations move up the occupation ladder. Three, between now and 1995, 70 percent of the new jobs in California will be white collar and skilled service, and there will not be sufficient new unskilled jobs that could be expected to accommodate the projected permanent Mexican immigrants.[37] The study concluded:

> Thus, while the integration process is working well now, the changing occupational structure of the state may impede its functioning in the future. One way to avoid this potential problem is to accelerate the educational advancement of future native-born Latinos so that they will be able to qualify for jobs in the state's white collar sector, where the growth in the economy is going to occur.[38]

Policies Necessary for Vigorous Future

The emphasis, ladies and gentlemen, has been on the wrong syllable. We have not been allocating enough resources to the greatest of our treasures—our children. We have the resources and the know-how to make the changes. We have only to decide to do it. As Frank Newman put it:

> National policy is not a result of some vast impersonal forces beyond our control. It is the sum of conscious decisions by policy makers, by institutional leaders, and by students. It is a matter of will. Both in terms of the formation of national policy and the education of the individual, what is needed is the belief that one can make a difference.[39]

It is a matter of will, but it goes beyond that. How one defines the problem influences the options for solutions. Ray Padilla put it well when he wrote to me, "Our children are not a problem. They are the solution! In any event, they are our future."[40] I have some suggestions for educational policies that will affect, not only Mexican America, but all of America.

1. Continue to insist that the educational system provide access for Mexican Americans to social and economic mobility.

2. Continue to scrutinize education preparations so that our children will do better on standardized tests, but demand that testing and assessing policies (including the correct use of tests) recognize their limitations.

3. Pay particular attention to the need for more teachers from Mexican America and other minority communities, and structure policies to ensure minority teachers will be both prepared and available.

4. Ray Padilla and Miguel Montiel suggest that in addition to participating fully in the larger political, social, cultural, economical, and educational institutions of society, we develop an educational ethic where Mexican American education is a moral imperative.[41]

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, I submit that the future is here! The future is now! In Mexican America, the future—here and now— is Brown . . . and progressively so. What happens in Mexican America affects us regionally, nationally, and internationally. If we do not do something—immediately—the future is bleak. No one will win; everyone will lose. If we move today to

provide quality educational opportunities for all students, the future is bright. Everyone will win; no one will lose.

when we walked
all over Minnesota
looking for work
No one seemed to care
we did not expect them to care

I hope that a future Chicano poet, now 3-4 years old or about to be born—another Tomas Rivera—will not be a member of a family that has to walk all over looking for work and will not have to write those two lines that continue to haunt me:

No one seemed to care
we did not expect them to care

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FOOTNOTES

[1]The Borderlands Journal. 8:2, Spring, 1985.

[2]J. R. Ladman, "The U.S. Border Regional Economy: Interdependence, Growth and Prospects for Change," in Views Across the Border. 2d ed.: by S. R. Ross. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, in press; "On El Main Street, U.S.A., The Birth of a New Nation," U.S. News and World Report, August 19, 1985, p.33.

[3]A. Madrid, L. Estrada, R. Santos, and M. Tienda. The Changing Profile of Mexican America: A Sourcebook for Policy Making. Claremont, CA: Tomas Rivera Center, 1985, p. 41.

[4]H. L. Hodgkinson, All One System: Demographics of Education, Kindergarten Through Graduate School. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Educational Leadership, 1985, p. 1.

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[6]H. Casso and G. D. Roman, eds., Chicanos in Higher Education: Proceedings of a National Institute on Access to Higher Education for the Mexican American. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico press, 1976.

[7]J. Karabel, "Community Colleges and Social Stratification," Harvard Educational Review. 42:4:521-562, November, 1972; M. A. Olivas, The Dilemma of Access: Minorities in Two Year Colleges. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1979; Astin, pp. 191-192.

[8]A. M. Cohen and F. B. Brawer, The American Community College. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982, pp. 342-365.

[9]Ibid., p. 349.

[10]Olivas, p. 25.

[11]A. G. de los Santos Jr., J. Montemayor, and E. Solis, Jr., "Chicano Students in Institutions of Higher Education: Access, Attrition, and Achievement," Aztlan: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research 14:1:96, Spring, 1983.

[12]A. G. de los Santos Jr., "The Role of the Community College in Developing Hispanic Leadership," in Hispanics in Higher Education: Leadership and Vision for the Next 25 Years, edited by L. A. Valverde and S. B. Garcia. Austin: Office for Advanced Research in Hispanic Education, University of Texas, 1982.

[13]"College Board Data Show Class of '85 Doing Better on SAT, Other Measures of Educational Attainment." New York: College Board, News release, September 23, 1985.

[14]Hodgkinson, p. 16.

FOOTNOTES (Continued)

[15]Letter from Ron Vera, February 13, 1986.

[16]G. R. Anrig, "Teacher Education and Teacher Testing: The Rush to Mandate." Speech presented to American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Denver, CO, March 2, 1985, p. 7.

[17]G. R. Anrig, "Identifying and Rewarding Excellence in Individuals." Panel Discussion at Annual Meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers, Little Rock, AR, November 22, 1983, p. 3.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Anrig, "Teacher Education," p. 5.

[20]Ibid.

[21]T. A. Arciniega, "Equity, Access, and Quality Control Issues in Teacher Education." Speech presented to Summer Institute of the Council of Chief State School Officers, Delevan, WI, August 1, 1985, p. 2.

[22]Madrid, et. al., p. 20.

[23]R. C. Schroeder, "Social Security Assessment." Editorial Research Reports, June 29, 1979, p. 468.

[24]J. McCue, "Baby Boom's New Echo." Editorial Research Reports, June 26, 1981, p. 485.

[25]Letter from H. L. Hodgkinson, January 23, 1986.

[26]Hodgkinson, All One System, p. 7.

[27]"The Disappearing Border." U.S. News and World Report. August 19, 1985, p. 30.

[28]Madrid, et. al., p. 20.

[29]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Conditions of Hispanics in America Today. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983, p. 13.

[30]"On El Main," p. 34.

[31]V. Burke, T. Gave, R. Rimkunas, J. Griffith, "Hispanic Children in Poverty." Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service No. 85-170 RPW, September 13, 1985.

[32]Hodgkinson, All One System, p. 8.

[33]Madrid, et. al., p. 31.

FOOTNOTES (Continued)

[34]Ibid., pp. 56-57.

[35]Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[36]J. Bruner, In Search of Mind: Essays in Autobiography. New York: Harper and Row, 1983, p. 196.

[37]K. F. McCarthy and R. B. Valdez, Current and Future Effects of Mexican Immigration in California: Executive Summary. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, November, 1985.

[38]Ibid., p. 37.

[39]F. Newman, Higher Education and the American Resurgence. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching, 1985, p. xv.

[40]Letter from R. V. Padilla, January 23, 1986.

[41]R. V. Padilla and M. Montiel, "The Socio-Historical Context for Action," An Action Plan for Chicano Higher Education in Arizona. Tucson, AZ: Mexican American Studies and Research Center, University of Arizona, 1984. Compiled and edited for Arizona Association of Chicanos for Higher Education, pp. 9-10.

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